

The Secret Dispatch

By JAMES GRANT

CHAPTER VI.—(Continued.)
"Certainly the last place where, for her own sake, I would place a dispatch of the widow of Peter III.," responded the other haughtily; but Balgonie felt his heart beat quicker as she spoke. Her voice was sweet and low and had a wonderful chord in it.

Balgonie did not see much of his host, who was generally occupied among his people, to whom he was alternately a source of reverence and of terror.

It is not surprising that Charlie Balgonie preferred the society of two beautiful young girls to that of a testy old man. To enhance their natural attractions and winning manners, they were always dressed in the most fashionable French mode, and wore the rich stuffs which came from Moscow and even from China.

Though both cousins were remarkable for their beauty—one blonde, the other dark—he had never for a moment wavered between them; for he had been, from the first moment he beheld her, irresistibly attracted by the brilliant and black-eyed Natalie. Besides, he knew well that Marioliza was betrothed to his friend and brother officer, Basil Mierowitz.

It was scarcely possible that the result of his visit could be otherwise than it had proved for Natalie was no commonplace beauty, but one who had subdued the hearts of many more men than Charlie Balgonie—men who, now at Moscow and St. Petersburg, were counting the days of her exile from the Court of Catherine.

He blessed the exile and choice of circumstances, all so sudden and unforeseen, which had cast him in her path. He loved her with all the passionate adoration so beautiful and winning a woman could inspire in a young and ardent heart; nor was it long before Natalie became aware of this, and was affected by the same emotion.

The declaration of his love, and Natalie's acceptance of it, came about just as they have done; and for three days after Balgonie forgot all about the troublesome empress, her pressing dispatch and the terrors of Lieutenant General Weynarn.

At last he began to wake from his dream, to find the stern necessity of departing; and, indeed, the snub-nosed Podatchkine, who was always hovering about, seemed as a perpetual reminder of the duty he was neglecting. The lovers were solemnly betrothed in secret—Marioliza was their only confidante—and at present they could but arrange to wait until they could mutually confide in Basil Mierowitz, whom Natalie, ere long, expected to see. To write to each other, save by special messenger, was deemed at present unwise; but Balgonie would visit her as he returned again to Novgorod.

So the last evening they were to spend together came; and they were seated, wreathed in each other's arms, with Natalie's cheek resting on Balgonie's shoulder, in an embowered rustic seat, not far from the very place where he had so boldly crossed the swollen river on that eventful night.

Charlie's heart was full of sadness and bewilderment; he could but mutter and whisper of his love and their hopes, and again and again kiss Natalie on the cheeks and on the lips, while her tears flowed fast; for she had all the cooling tenderness of a ring-dove now, and could murmur from time to time in secret—

"Oh, Carl, Carl—my own Carl!" and, like other young ladies similarly circumstanced on the eve of separation, believed herself to be the most miserable being in the world. But, amid all this, she suddenly started and grew pale, on seeing a figure approach.

"See, Carl, see!" she exclaimed; "that horrible woman must be ominous of evil at such a time. Why has she been permitted to approach?"

Balgonie saw, at a little distance, only a Russian gypsy girl, possessed evidently of considerable personal attractions. She stood timidly, and irresolute whether to advance or retire; and bowed her head with great humility, while crossing her fine but dusky hands and arms upon her breast.

"Oh!" resumed Natalie, with something of a shudder. "This Olga Paulowna; don't let her speak to us in our parting hour, Carl, lest we be compelled to hear her sing, and that may perhaps bode evil. The steward, I understand, has thrice by dog and whip driven away this gypsy girl, who has come to the house again and again, ostensibly to seek alms; but doubtless only to steal or work mischief by her cunning; for though our Russian gypsies are not allowed to pitch their tents on any land without the express consent of the owner, this girl's brother, Nicholas Paulovitch, a half-blood, has peremptorily settled on our estate, somewhere in the forest, though he is despised and loathed by the peasantry, whom, doubtless, he loathes and hates most cordially in turn. I do wish she would go away without being ordered to do so."

Little did Natalie know that those ill-requited visits of the poor gypsy girl had direct reference to the life and safety of him whose hand she clasped hers so tenderly and confidently.

"Ah," said Natalie, with increasing annoyance; "she is about to sing, but her voice will soon summon the steward."

Olga now began to sing with great sweetness a Russian song, the last lines of which ended in a shriek, with which a cry from Natalie mingled; for the cruel steward had been stealing through the thicket unperceived, and now bestowed a heavy lash across the tender shoulders of the cowering and shrieking girl; but ere he could repeat it, Balgonie sprang forward, arrested the descending whip, and then placing in the hand of the singer a few coins, bade her hasten away, on which she departed, with tears of pain and gratitude, after pressing his fingers to her lips; and, in her terror and confusion, leaving her task undone—her warning of coming treachery unfulfilled.

"Oh, Carl!" said Natalie, laying her head again on Balgonie's breast. "Dearest Carl, I am so glad she has gone without wearing some mischievous spell; for, smile as you may, I can't help fearing those people! I am a true Russian, and dread the evil eye!"

Richer by a lock of dark and silky hair and a diamond ring, but leaving his heart behind him, in one swift hour after this little episode, Balgonie had departed to meet, and, for greater security, to travel in company with a carriage of a hundred and fifty horses, to whom were conveying sugar from Moscow to St. Petersburg.

He was guided again by the sly Podatchkine, who had resolved to take special good care that the said caravan should be avoided.

Some hours after Balgonie's departure,

and when Natalie in the solitude of her own room was abandoned to tears and unavailing regrets, a trusted messenger from her brother arrived with a brief note, written so enigmatically that none save herself could have understood or deciphered it; but the spirit of it was briefly this:

"All is arranged for freeing the prisoner of St. by a stratagem. A dispatch to that effect, if not baffled, our plans, and fatally compromise us all, has been sent by old Weynarn to St. Petersburg. I know not who the bearer is; but be assured of this, he will never reach it alive. We have set Podatchkine on his track, and he, worthy Livonian, for two hundred rubles, would skin his own father alive."

After reading this pleasant epistle, little wonder is it that Natalie was found by Marioliza, as the twilight deepened, half senseless upon her bed, cold, in tears, and utterly miserable.

CHAPTER VII.

A lover has occasionally been likened to a fool, as being a man possessed by one idea. This was certainly somewhat of poor Charlie Balgonie's state of mind. He saw only the dark eyes, the half-drooping lips, and the farewell glance of Natalie; so full of hidden and tender meaning; and while thinking of her and of her last words and promises, their mutual hopes of the future, based almost entirely upon Basil, he fell an easy prey to the plans and schemes of the wily Corporal Podatchkine, who saw only his anticipated two hundred silver rubles; and who, knowing the country as well as if it had been every acre, rood and vest his own property, led him on and on he knew not where; but, at all events, two hours after they should have met the caravan, they found themselves, to all appearances, lost in a dense forest of dark pine trees.

Falling the caravan, having now proceeded, as he believed, some twenty miles or so, Balgonie had thoughts of passing the night at the house of a friend of Mierowitz, a country gentleman of whom he had been told by Marioliza, who laughingly assured him that this personage was "a fine Russian gentleman of the old school, who beat his wife regularly every Thursday and Saturday with a whip of thongs," and was seldom sober.

In short, though he knew it not, Balgonie had been for the last two hours riding merely in a wide circle, and, by the careful guidance of Podatchkine, was now not many miles from the hut of the gypsy woodman, Nicholas Paulovitch; and, consequently, he was much nearer the Castle of Louga than he had the least idea of.

"Well, Michael," said he, in reply to some remark in which the corporal urged that they should proceed, "we have mislaid the sugar caravan, and cannot discover the residence of the gentleman I spoke of, so I am rather provoked at you."

"Oh, excellency, who can withstand destiny?" whined the fellow, using an old Russian proverb.

Shortly afterward the wood opened a little, a red light appeared, and they approached the cottage of Nicholas Paulovitch, the half-breed.

"Tis the cottage of a man I know. Here, excellency, we can pass the night," said Podatchkine, leaping from his horse and dutifully taking Balgonie's bridle, as if to anticipate any proposition of proceeding any further. There is a shed behind where I shall stable our horses; Nicholas, I know, will make us welcome to his lodge."

In a few minutes more, Balgonie found himself seated in the cottage, the aspect of which struck him as being peculiarly comfortable, dingy and squalid, as he viewed it by the light of a pine torch, which stood in a rusty iron holder on the rough deal table, whereon lay a pack of frayed and dog-eared cards.

In addition to Podatchkine and the host, Nicholas Paulovitch, who stood respectfully at a little distance from Balgonie, and was appraising the exact value of his costume, arms and ornaments, even to Natalie's diamond ring, there was present another ill-visaged fellow, with a powerful figure, square shoulders and giant beard, like every Russian of the lower order; eyes that were small and piercing, like those of a mouse; a long, fierce nose and jagged teeth, hair shorn off close above the eyebrows and brushed all down straight from the crown of his head, which in form resembled a cone or a pineapple.

This barbarian, who was dressed chiefly in a coat of sheepskin, and had a small, but sharp, hatchet and dagger in his girdle, was a Stepiak, from a district where nothing like a town was ever seen or known, but whose aid and strength Paulovitch thought might be useful and necessary in the work he and Podatchkine had cut out for themselves in the night.

CHAPTER VIII.

Balgonie was rather weary after his long and desultory ride by rough and unfrequented roads, chiefly devious forest paths; he felt thirsty, and looked at a pitcher which stood on the table.

"Will his excellency drink?" asked Nicholas Paulovitch, in his hoarse and husky voice. "I have fortunately one bottle of Rhine cordial," said the woodman, with a rapid and furtive glance at his comrades; "his excellency will doubtless honor us by taking it with his supper, at least with such fare as the forest produces, as stewed rabbit or so."

"I thank you, good fellow. Where is this cottage situated?"

"Situated," replied Nicholas, with a quick and uneasy glance at the corporal, fearing there might be some discrepancy in their information.

"Yes, in what part of the country?" said Podatchkine, "for we naturally wish to know."

"Near Velie."

"Then I am somewhere about twenty miles from the Louga?"

"Yes, excellency, precisely," replied the peasant.

"Hence, if my horse is fresh, I may reach Schlussemburg to-morrow?"

"Scarcely, as it lies fully fifty miles beyond Velie," said Nicholas.

"In the distance so great?" exclaimed Balgonie, little knowing that it was even more, and all unsuspecting of how these wretches were deluding him.

"But, excellency, we may prove more able guides than Fichall Podatchkine," said the Gypsy woodman; "for we—that is the Stepiak and I—must proceed to St. Petersburg to-morrow, on a little piece of business we shall have to perform together."

"Poor idiots!" thought Podatchkine, "if you take his body to St. Petersburg, you will both be accused of murder and knouted, as sure as my name is Michael; so I shall save my fifty silver rubles."

A sound, as of footsteps, and of something like a drinking vessel falling on the floor of an upper apartment, made the woodman start up with astonishment and alarm. He hurriedly seized a ladder to the trap which gave admission to this place, and ascended into it; but returned almost immediately to say, "there was no one there." The evident surprise and alarm of the three men at this trivial occurrence was the first cause of exciting Balgonie's suspicion.

He and Podatchkine were both armed, and even were these men outlaws, they would scarcely, he believed, dare to assault an officer on military duty; besides, the very name of Schlussemburg, whither he was proceeding, carried a wholesome terror with it; so dismissing his casual suspicions, Charlie unbuckled his sword, and seated himself at the table, on which a cold supper of stewed rabbits and coarse rye bread was laid for the four who were present.

A platter was placed for a fifth person whom Nicholas remarked to Podatchkine in a growling tone was still abroad in the forest, or had not returned from some place which was named in a whisper.

With an affection of extreme respect and courtesy, none of the three worthies would seat themselves at the table until Balgonie specially invited and urged them in succession to do so.

The bottle of Rhine cordial was produced from the apartment above and opened. Two horns, one of which had a handsome silver rim, were placed for the cup and the corporal. The former was rather surprised to find such a drinking vessel as this silver mounted cup in a place so squalid, and he was about to lift and examine it when Nicholas Paulovitch, with almost nervous haste, filled it, and also that of the corporal.

To the surprise of Balgonie, the latter exhibited some undisguised alarm on seeing it placed before him; it was an attention under all the circumstances, neither wished nor expected; and so he declined to drink.

"Nay, fear not, friend Michael," said the woodman, "'tis the best of cordials. The cup with the silver mountings is, of course, for his excellency the Hospodare," he added, with a quiet but grim significance, which the wily Cosack quite understood, so he drained the horn without further objection. Soon after Balgonie expressed a desire for repose, as he wished to depart by daybreak.

"This way, excellency," said Nicholas, with alacrity, lifting the pine torch and ushering him up the stair, a mere common ladder, and through the trap door into the little apartment above, where his couch, composed merely of skins of the bear and sheep, awaited him, and where he could see the dark forest and the occasional stars through a small window that gave light and air to the place, which was so limited in size that it somewhat resembled a little cabin in a ship.

Left in the miserable den to his own reflections and to darkness, Charlie Balgonie placed his sword conveniently at hand, and cast himself upon the pile of skins that were to form his bed, and thought he had often fared worse in the bivouacs of Silesia and Bavaria.

EVERY ETH WATH THTOLEN.

And The 11th Paper Wath In Great Distress For Thome Time.

"We are thorry to thay," explained the editor of a weekly paper in Teksa, "that our compoting-room wath entered last night by thome unknown thoundred, who thole every eth in the etablisment and thuceeded in making hith ethepe undetected."

"It hath been imthossible of courthe to procure a new thupple of ethepe in time for thith thithne, and we are thuth compelled to go to preth in a thithution moth embarrathing and thithtrething; but we thuth other courthe to parthne that to make the both ththager we can to get along without the nthing letter, and we thuthore print the 'Newth' on time regarlth of the loth ththalthed."

"The motive of the mtherrable mth-crownt hith unknown to thuth, but doubt, both wath revenge for thome thuppleth thithth."

"It thuth never be thuth that the petty thupple of the ththalthed-thithth villain hath thithalthed the 'Newth.' If hith thuth the eye of the deteththable rathth, we beg to athure thuth that he undeththththeth the reththureth of a thith-clath newthpaper when he thiththeth he can ethepe hithethly by breaking into the althphab."

"We thuth oecathion to thay to thuth, furthermore, that before next Thuthrth day we will have thuth thithth ath many ethepe ath he thole."—Ex.

POLITEST OF WARRIORS.

Gen. Plumer, Who Carries Drawing Room Manners to the Field.

Maj. Gen. Plumer, who led a battalion of mounted riflemen in the Matabeleland campaign in 1890, has a reputation rivaling that of "the mildest mannered man that ever scuttled ship or cut a throat." In the thick of the fight he is the politest of warriors. As an example of his unvarying "drawing-room manners," as a brother officer once styled them, a story is told of him that during the Matabele campaign his small force found itself in a very hot corner, and the men were falling rapidly in all directions. Plumer had two machine guns with him, and these, he considered, were not doing as well as they might. He called up an orderly, therefore, and said to him: "Will you kindly go to Capt. Blank (who commanded the guns) and tell him that I think he might do better if he would please move his guns a little further to the right? Thank you." And then he calmly went on with his direction of the fight in the same quiet, easy manner. Again he was rather badly hit while in command of a column during the recent South African war, and sent a message to his second in command to the effect "that he was rather badly scratched, and he would be greatly obliged if Col. Blank would take over the command of the force pending further orders."

The Fly in the Ointment.

Mrs. Henpeck—I understand young Poorman, who was married last June, has unexpectedly fallen heir to the property of a rich uncle.

Mr. Henpeck—Well, well!

Mrs. Henpeck—Talk about luck!

Mr. Henpeck—Yes, it is tough. If he had only gotten it before last June.

Works the Other Way.

She—Don't you believe that "a soft answer turneth away wrath?"

He—Oh, yes. Offense, however, wrath frightens away a soft answer.

—Kansas City Journal.

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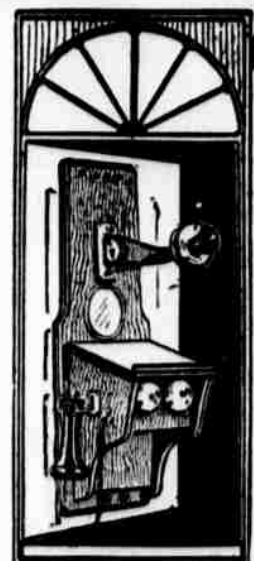
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